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LETTER DATED 28 MAY 1996 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF DJIBOUTI TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to refer to today's debate on Liberia in the Security Council. I was inscribed to participate in the debate; however, I regret to be unable to return to New York in time. I would appreciate, therefore, if the statement that I would have delivered, had I been there, could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Roble OLHAYE

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Annex

Statement on the situation in Liberia to be presented to the Security Council on 28 May 1996 by the Permanent Representative of Djibouti to the United Nations

At the outset I wish to congratulate you most warmly on your assumption of the Presidency of the Security Council for the current month. We are confident of your skills and experience; no doubt, the Council is in good hands.

We also wish to express our deep gratitude to Ambassador Juan Somavia of Chile for successfully and capably guiding the work of the Council last month.

The ongoing crisis in Liberia has undoubtedly major implications for the deprived people of Liberia, for its neighbours who sacrificed so much, for Africa and for the international community at large, in particular, the United Nations Security Council. The initiative of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to establish a peace-keeping force (ECOMOG) in 1990, following the failure by the international community to intervene in Liberia's civil war, was hailed as "the regional answer to a regional problem". The African peace-keeping force, ECOMOG, however weakened, demoralized and even despised, remains the only viable recourse. There is perhaps little peace to keep. But the obligation to stay the course is even more compelling. ECOWAS has so far resisted all pressures to pull out entirely; for the original motivation to intervene - "not to watch Liberia disintegrate and destabilize the region" - is even more valid than ever before. Liberia's interim Head of State, Wilton Sankawulo, reaffirmed his faith in ECOWAS when he made this appeal last week:

> "Our message is that we are here to work with ECOWAS in order to bring peace to this country. We have already given instructions to the peace-keepers to take charge of the city of Monrovia, in fact of the whole country."

The latest plunge into chaos, carnage and destruction was perhaps avoidable, were it not the familiar factional greed in attempting to assert political control and authority over Monrovia - the symbol of power and legitimacy.

There is an old expression which says that "men will always be reasonable - when they have tried everything else". Can we doubt that, with regard to Liberia, we have tried everything else? Now, after nearly six years of conflict, some 13 peace accords, 3 interim Governments and a commendable regional peace-keeping initiative, what must be done remains clear, as are the roles which the various parties involved, or not involved, must play. The seventeenth report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Liberia and that of UNOMIL (S/1996/362) draws similar conclusions.

The Liberian tragedy has turned out to be far more than simply another "African descent into chaos". True, at the heart of the conflict lies distrust, if not hatred, a legacy of mutual victimization and marked warlord power grabs, all which have contributed to the failures of the series of peace processes.

For without a firm and a lasting cease-fire, credible disarmament and demobilization, factions, even subfactions, retain the power to dictate the terms and pace of peace and security in Liberia.

But a closer examination of the situation seems to reveal a wider field of involvement than the Liberian factions alone. Significant regional, international and linguistic rivalries are being contested in Liberia, power plays which supersede local factional tensions. Past allusions to this wider scenario, as it applied to ECOMOG, raised questions regarding its neutrality. This provided a ready excuse for hesitation and even non-compliance for some factions.

The fact is that ECOMOG's six-year effort is both unique and commendable. Without it, one can only wonder where Liberia would be today; whether any peace effort at all would have been possible. Even allusions to recent unrest and turmoil in Monrovia as signs of ECOMOG's demise as an effective deterrent are unfair. For ECOMOG has maintained law and order in Monrovia since 1990. Maintaining law and order is a tall order, and that is why United Nations forces too often shy away from such basic tasks under the pretext of lack of the right mandate. This, though, is what ECOMOG has been doing for years in Monrovia. Its collaboration with the United Nations is a first - a subregional peace initiative in conjunction with the world body. But the participating nations of ECOWAS no longer have the resources to continue the effort alone. ECOMOG is in shambles. Its morale is low, it is underfunded, ill-equipped and undermanned. If ECOMOG is recognized as "key to the process of restoring peace" in Liberia, it needs to refurbish its chaotic finances as well as to enhance its capacity to be able not only to revive the peace deal but also to implement it. The United States of America, given its historical role in Liberia, perhaps bears a special responsibility.

With proper strength, equipment and training, ECOMOG could be an effective force and could undertake meaningful disarmament which in the end may bring about a semblance of peace and security without which elections and government are not possible. For the whole period the war had been raging in Liberia, the international community chose to adopt a "hands-off" approach. It avoided direct engagement in the war and it also failed to provide a consistent and a meaningful backing to the African peace-keeping initiative. This highlights a paradox. The cost in humanitarian aid is already over $500 million and the cost of reconstructing the country is mind-boggling. A fraction of that could have gone to the peace-keepers and perhaps by now peace would be within our reach. It is so often the case to rush to treat the disease rather than cure it. Had ECOWAS decided at its summit last August to withdraw its force, the consequences would have been greater humanitarian tragedy and full-scale war across the country, with the potential to suck the region into its whirlpool. Even now, the humanitarian disaster is horrendous, from the number and condition of displaced persons, refugees, the sick and homeless, rampant disease, hunger and destruction to death. The long-term effects are hard to imagine for nationhood, development and viability.

There appears to be no alternative to a strong involvement by the international community. It cannot pretend its ignorance of the reality in Liberia. This is a conflict which preceded United Nations operations like Bosnia, Haiti and Somalia. The effort to wash one's hands of direct involvement, to leave it to underfunded "proxies", to hope it would just go away, has not worked! Liberia remains - it is not going away! And as long as this is so, the responsibility lies in this room. The Liberian crisis not only remains, it is certain to haunt us all.